



WHEN WALLEYE FISHING WANES

The Missouri's Other Fish

By Ron Wilson

It started with northern pike, a toothy creature adopted as North Dakota's state fish in 1969.

Lake Sakakawea's pike fishing from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s had few rivals. Fish weighing more than 20 pounds were not uncommon. Highway billboards touted one of the largest man-made lakes in the country as *Pike Capitol of the Nation*. Northern pike fishing was early tourism on Sakakawea – the big lake was on the fishing map.

Then something happened in the late 1970s to change things. Rock substrate, walleye spawning habitat buried under layers of sediment, was finally washed clean. The lake went from flooded terrestrial weeds, preferred pike spawning habitat, to rocks, and the walleye population exploded. Word spread, the walleye fishing sages converged on Sakakawea, and the *Pike Capitol of the Nation* billboards – even though the pike fishing was still pretty good – needed a new face.

Three decades later, during which time anglers experienced a frustrating rise and fall of the federally-managed water, Missouri River System walleye are still the angler's favorite flavor. In 2003, for instance, nearly 90 percent of all Missouri River System anglers fished for walleye. And 5 of the remaining 10 percent were probably fishing for chinook salmon, said Greg Power, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries division chief.

There are a number of reasons for this infatuation. Walleye, for one, are arguably the best eating fish out there. Two, the walleye fishing has been good for so long, they're hard to ignore. "People are more open, a little more diversified in winter, and they'll pursue other fish species through the ice," Power said. "But when there's open water, it's all about walleye."

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anglers are missing a good thing by focusing on one species. The Missouri River System has a number of fish – smallmouth bass, white bass, channel catfish and trout, for instance – that provide wonderful recreational opportunities, but are overlooked for whatever reason. "Some anglers do pursue these other species, but it's usually during the off season," said Jeff Hendrickson, Department north central district fisheries supervisor, Riverdale. "Or they'll by chance happen into some smallmouth bass, or some other species, and concentrate on them awhile."

If you're into fishing for the fight, then some of these other species deserve a shot. "All of them fight better than walleye ... some of these fish will really test the angler's ability," Hendrickson said. "None are quite as good eating as walleye, but all are definitely good table fare."

Smallmouth bass aficionados will argue that this fish, pound for pound, is one of the hardest fighting around. And, according to Department fisheries biologists, Lake Sakakawea is loaded with them. "Sakakawea has both quantity and quality when it comes to smallmouth bass," Power said. "The smallmouth reproduction in the 1990s was phenomenal."

Just about any rocky point on the lower third of Sakakawea, Power said, holds smallmouth bass. "If you know what you're doing, there is some tremendous smallmouth fishing," he said.

The biggest concentration of adult smallmouth bass, Hendrickson said, are along the face of the dam, or in Rodeo Bay or Sakakawea Bay. "You might catch fish somewhere else, but your odds are a lot better at these locations," he said.

In 2005, anglers who participated in the Game and Fish Department's Catch and Release Club reported two dozen fish from Sakakawea that met or exceeded the club's

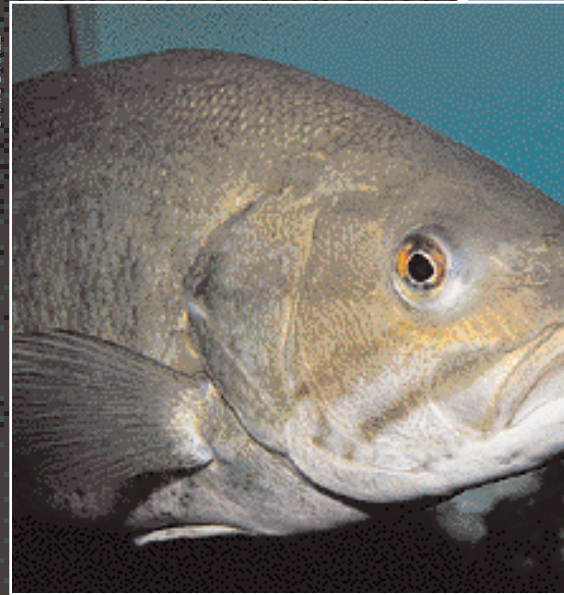
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Walleye get the most ink, but catfish and other species offer quality Missouri River System angling experiences.



CRAIG BIHRLE



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White bass, (with crankbait), smallmouth bass, (top), and catfish, (bottom), offer anglers a change of pace when the walleye bite is slow.



16-inch minimum length. (This is just a sample, of course, as not all anglers participate in the Catch and Release and Whopper Club programs.) The biggest fish was 22 inches – a dandy smallmouth in any angler's book. "It's an untapped fishery," Power said.

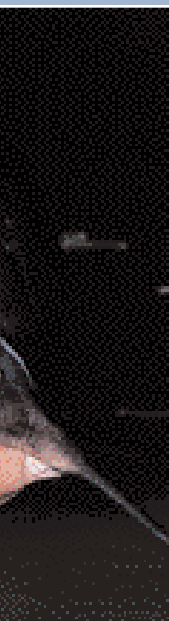
Even though it's walleye country, it's difficult to understand how the trout fishing in the Garrison Dam Tailrace doesn't get more play. Here is a fishery where you have a legitimate shot at catching a fish big enough to get even the most hardcore walleye angler to take notice. "The chance of catching a 20-pound-plus trout in the Tailrace is pretty good," Hendrickson said.

The term "world-class fishery" is terribly abused, and often used inaccurately, Power said, but he believes the Tailrace trout fishing deserves the distinction. "One of the true world-class fisheries for brown trout is our Tailrace," he said. "Any day out there on the Tailrace you have the chance to catch a state record – for any number of fish species, not just trout."

In the last eight years, three state record trout have been taken from the Tailrace, including a 21-pound, 4-ounce rainbow caught in 1998; a 10-pound, 1-ounce cutthroat caught in 2003; and a 31-pound, 11-ounce brown trout (that looks like it swallowed a ham) caught in 2005. The state's record chinook salmon, a 31-pound-plus fish, was also taken from the Tailrace years ago.

The Game and Fish Department stocks the Missouri River at the Tailrace with brown trout and cutthroat trout on a rotating basis – one year browns get released into the system, followed by cutthroats the next year.

Cutthroats are the newest addition to the Tailrace. They were introduced by Department fisheries biologists in spring 1999 and quickly became the flavor of the month for some anglers. The newcomers were 6-8 inches long and weighed one-third pound when released. By late August, Hendrickson said, the cutthroats had doubled in size. By 2000, anglers reported to the



Department's Whopper Club 41 fish of 5 pounds or heavier. The previous state record – 3 pounds, 13 ounces from Hooker Lake in Rolette County in 1984 – was broken 10 times in 2000.

When you talk about fishing for catfish in the state, people immediately think, and rightfully so, of the Red River in eastern North Dakota. But the Missouri River System has some decent catfishing – just ask the nonresidents. Power said when people are seen fishing for catfish, typically they're from Iowa, Nebraska, or other states farther south. "Fishing for catfish for these people is part of their culture," he said. "That's not the case in North Dakota."

When drought, and outdated federal water management guidelines, haven't sucked much of the Missouri's water downstream, the upper end of Lake Oahe is one of the better catfish destinations, Power said. "There are so many catfish down there," he said.

There's also a strong catfish population on the upper end of Sakakawea and in the Missouri River. Your best bet for a fish of 10 pounds or more is in this area near Williston. Again, the Tailrace provides some good fishing for smaller cats, especially during summer.

The thought process for white bass mimics that of catfish – anglers tend to link these fish with another fishery, Devils Lake in this case, and not the Missouri River System.

"White bass fishing is best in upper Lake Oahe when we have an upper Lake Oahe," Power said. "Otherwise, late May through early July is the best time to target white bass in the Missouri River. Some years they are extremely abundant from south of Bismarck to the dam; other years there appears to be a slow upstream movement. The fishing is better near Bismarck in May, for instance, and better near the dam in June."

The white bass fishing in Sakakawea, Power said, is fairly unpredictable. The only thing predictable about fishing the Missouri River System is that the majority of anglers will likely continue to ignore most all fish species but walleye, which is unfortunate.

"There are going to be some slow days of walleye fishing, so why not try something else," Power said.

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RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.